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AUTHOR	Ewell, Peter T.
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ABSTRACT

Legitimate external groups that seek accountability for educational outcomes are identified, and attention is directed to choices for designing an institutional assessment, as well as principles to guide institutions' response to accountability demands. Appropriate domains of accountability include: (1) the authority of state government to regulate and govern public colleges; (2) the review of institutions by regional accreditation bodies; and (3) calls for individual colleges and universities to provide information to guide "consumer choice." Areas in which colleges must choose how to proceed with an assessment include: what to assess, how to organize the assessment, and the manner and extent to which assessment results are communicated. Principles that institutions can follow in their response to accountability demands include: respond visibly to domains of legitimate external concern, build on strength, and show action. Particular actions that institutions can undertake include: extending or initiating post-testing of basic skills, experimenting with new approaches to student evaluation within the regular curriculum, and making assessment a visible part of the curriculum and important administrative processes. (SW)

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Assessment, Accountability and Improvement: Managing the Contradiction

by

Peter T. Ewell

National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS)

Prepared for the American Association for Higher Education

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Assessment, Accountability and Improvement:
Managing the Contradiction

Assessing the results of undergraduate education continues to receive considerable attention across all sectors of higher education. Growing out of a wider movement of undergraduate reform, current interest demonstrates increasing recognition within the academy that assessment is an important tool for ongoing instructional improvement. Recently, however, a new set of assessment issues has emerged. These issues involve the use of assessment as an accountability device, to assure external bodies charged with governing and funding higher education that their invested resources are well spent. How ought institutions respond to these issues? How can they adequately meet growing demands for accountability and at the same time undertake serious internal investigations of instructional effectiveness?

In posing this question, it is important to recall that the current "assessment movement" in higher education has its roots in two quite different traditions. Its first antecedent has a long history, and concerns the use of assessment as an integral part of instruction. This tradition is embodied in many time-honored curricular practices (among them the senior comprehensive examination) that are currently being "rediscovered" on many college campuses. It also embraces more recent and innovative "assessment center" approaches. Early efforts at programmatic evaluation for instructional improvement--for example, the Examiner's Office at the University of Chicago and the General College at the University of Minnesota (Pace 1979)--are also a part of this approach to assessment. Finally, the values and lessons of this tradition are written into virtually every recent call for undergraduate reform (NIE 1984, AAC 1985, NEH 1984).

A second tradition holds that the primary purpose of student assessment is to demonstrate the effectiveness of public education to a variety of external constituencies. Certainly no one will deny the current strength of this tradition. As documented by a recent survey, two-thirds of the states now claim or plan an assessment initiative of some kind, and over 80% of the fifty state higher education officials surveyed expect state activity in the realm of assessment policy to become more prominent (Boyer et al. 1987). But assessment for accountability too has strong historical roots. Though largely foreign to higher education, a primary reason for large-scale testing of elementary and secondary school students since the turn of the century has been to reassure a variety of external publics (Resnick 1982). Indeed, as Resnick argues, the tenor of assessment debates is familiar even in their earliest manifestations. Large-scale cognitive testing programs are particularly resonant with an American public character that demands demonstrable results for resources invested. They are also compellingly consistent with a "rational" conception of public policy that emphasizes information-based decisionmaking for purposes of incremental improvement. Furthermore, testing for these purposes has certainly not been novel for postsecondary audiences in such areas as teacher education and in the certification process for professional practice in a wide range of fields.

Though both these traditions have a long history, their contradiction poses for most institutions a considerable dilemma--a fact that academic administrators have been quick to recognize (El-Khawas 1986). If instructional improvement is

to be seriously attempted, most administrators recognize that the process will take considerable time. Most also realize that serious efforts will require approaches to assessment that go far beyond standardized tests. As precarious organizational leaders, moreover, academic administrators understand that implementing meaningful campus change demands persuasion of a suspicious, reluctant, and generally powerful faculty. If, on the other hand, demands for public accountability are to be adequately met, the kinds of information provided must be externally credible, must be capable of supporting comparative judgments on relative institutional and program performance, and must be straightforward enough to be comprehensible to a lay audience. To convince a doubting legislature or board that the institution and its faculty are serious about assessment also requires academic administrators to design a process that is organizationally prominent and that is capable of producing quick results. Nor is this balancing act made easier by the <u>form</u> of emerging state initiatives. Most such initiatives are sincere in their claim that, like institutional assessment, their primary purpose is local instructional improvement. But coincidence of motives is not sufficient to overcome legitimate defensiveness on the part of institutions; for them, the <u>source</u> of such "encouragement" alone raises many potential problems.

Given the terms of this contradiction, how can and should institutions respond? The purpose of this paper is to provide some initial answers. Addressing the issue adequately, however, requires accomplishing several tasks. First, it is by no means clear that "external demands for accountability" are of the same kind, and different demands may require different kinds of response. Several distinct areas of external accountability must be distinguished and the assessment domains appropriate to each established. Secondly, general contradictions between accountability and improvement are embodied in a set of concrete choices about how to design and implement a local assessment effort. Among the choices that must be made are what particular dimensions of student performance to assess, the kinds (and particularly the degree of standardization) of instruments and assessment procedures to adopt, where to locate responsibility for assessment in the institution's organizational structure, and how to use and communicate assessment results. Finally, discussion of these issues suggests some principles for action. Although these principles are heuristic, they suggest a number of concrete, short-term strategies for institutions to consider.

Some Appropriate Domains of Accountability: Who Owes What to Whom?

External pressure to account for educational results has come from many sources. Most visible, of course, are the recent actions of state government, either directly through legislative statute or indirectly through higher education coordinating and governing boards. Less visible but nevertheless important is heightened interest in assessment on the part of regional and professional accreditation bodies. Least focused but perhaps most pervasive have been a variety of calls for "consumer protection" (for example, Bennett 1985). Each of these sources represents a somewhat different kind of accountability.

But what exactly is meant by "accountability"? Recently, observers in higher education have argued that the concept has two distinct dimensions--discharging assigned institutional missions effectively and demonstrating that these responsibilities have in fact been effectively discharged (Jones and Ewell 1987). Distinguishing between the performance and communications aspects of accountability is important because these two requirements may differ substantially for different constituents. Furthermore, specifying the particular dimensions of accountability with respect to performance and communication requires a careful analysis of both the information needs and the assigned responsibilities of each constituency to whom accountability is owed. In each case, the analysis must determine: a) the basis upon which accountability is owed; b) the substance of the obligation with respect to specific types of performance; and c) the kinds of information about performance appropriate to provide evidence of effective performance.

Given this requirement, appropriate domains of accountability for particular external constituencies are both limited and specifiable. And given the fact that institutions are likely to see in any external request for information a substantial threat, it is important that they recognize which of these are at least arguably legitimate.

1. State Government. For reasons of substantial investment and established governance, state authorities can legitimately claim from public colleges and universities considerable accountability for results. Given the state's charge to maintain and develop its higher education asset as a whole, moreover, private institutions may also be appropriately subject to limited accountability demands. These are reinforced where state-funded financial aid programs allow citizens of the state to attend private institutions at their discretion.

   Historically, state governments have funded, regulated, and governed higher education in pursuit of three basic goals (Ewell 1985). A first is access. Part of the justification for equal access is philosophic: if college and university instruction does in fact provide opportunities for individual economic and social mobility, discriminatory access to these benefits is disallowed. But part of the justification for access is also instrumental: given the need for trained manpower for economic development, states cannot afford to waste potential talent. Historically, accountability for access has been limited to inputs. Most states, for example, currently require public institutions to report both current enrollments and new students by ethnicity, gender, and (more rarely) categories of economic or educational

disadvantage. In a few cases, primarily those southeastern states affected by federal desegregation initiatives, access is also treated in limited output terms. Institutions are required to monitor and report persistence and degree completion rates for identified ethnic subpopulations.

A second historic foundation of state involvement in higher education is to sustain economic development. Applied research and development capacity within public colleges and universities, and the provision of trained manpower to sustain growth in identified critical occupational areas are key arenas of concern in pursuit of this goal. Here accountability resides primarily in a periodic inventory of assets. University research capacity is documented in the form of the availability and adequacy of equipment, funding, and personnel. The provision of trained manpower is monitored in terms of the capacity, distribution, and quality of available professional programs in identified areas. But some output dimensions are also occasionally included. Research effectiveness, for example, is sometimes assessed in terms of success in garnering federal funds, the award of which is generally based on peer review. Similarly, the provision of trained manpower is sometimes judged by the production of graduates in particular fields.

A third reason for state involvement is to ensure that citizens of the state possess minimum levels of skills in critical areas of "functional citizenship". This claim is partially bound up with concerns about access and economic development: to sustain development, the state needs to count on <u>all</u> its citizens possessing critical general skills. The claim is also justified in terms of the responsibilities of citizen participation and quality of life. Though publicly acknowledged, this arena is in most states not a part of established accountability reporting. States such as New Jersey, Georgia, and Florida that require basic or collegiate skills testing of public college and university students constitute significant exceptions.

State authority is also ultimately responsible for maintenance of the higher education asset as a whole. Here responsibility is assumed not for a particular domain of performance, but for sustaining an educational capacity over time. Traditionally, maintenance of the asset is approached in resource terms--for example, the adequacy of finance, of physical plant and equipment, of faculty, and of curricular and program offerings. The notion of capacity also includes the presence of particular management and administrative processes deemed important to sustain institutional viability. Among these are financial accounting and resource allocation, personnel review and recruitment, and institutional planning and program evaluation.

What do these four traditional, and largely legitimate, areas of state responsibility suggest as appropriate arenas of concern with respect to educational outcomes? Broadly conceived, they argue for two distinct kinds of accountability. First, in areas in which the state has a legitimate and direct responsibility, institutions may appropriately be required to provide information on actual performance. Examples include the following:

- Persistence and program completion rates for particular demographic and economic/educationally disadvantaged populations

- Graduation, job placement, and certification/performance rates in selected occupations or professions deemed important to attaining state economic development goals

- Mastery of minimal basic skills in reading, writing and computation and evaluations of the effectiveness of remediation.

In all such cases it may be legitimate for states to collect such information in standardized form and on a comparative basis. Beyond these areas, however, standardized comparative data collection will be generally inappropriate.

Secondly, given the state's legitimate responsibility for maintaining the higher education asset, institutions may appropriately be held accountable for particular processes or functions assumed to contribute to institutional effectiveness. Among these are:

- Mission review and analysis, including specification of the kinds of instructional outcomes intended

- Evaluation of the effectiveness of general education programs

- Evaluation of the outcomes of individual degree programs (perhaps under the rubric of program review)

- Evaluation of student satisfaction and individual goal attainment

- Utilization of assessment results in institutional decisionmaking processes.

It is consistent with state responsibility to require institutions to present evidence that they are engaged in each of these processes in a meaningful way. It is less consistent with this responsibility that they be explicitly required to report the results of such processes. And it is not at all consistent with state responsibility that such evidence be reported in a standardized, comparative manner.

2. Accreditation. Regional accreditation bodies have traditionally reviewed institutions according to broadly defined criteria of viability. In most cases, viability has been defined in terms of assets and inputs; only recently have outcomes been stressed. Professional accreditation bodies, in contrast, examine particular programs from the limited perspective of an occupation or profession. Here outcomes assessment may be required, but generally in the form of individual certification to practice.

The legitimate domain of professional accreditation has been much debated, and several national reports have called on professional accrediting bodies to provide greater choice and flexibility in curricula than current standards allow (NIE 1984). But there has been relatively little debate about the legitimacy of requiring demonstrations of professional competence on the part of program graduates. Because professional accreditation signifies accountability to a particular professional community (and indirectly to the publics and clients served by that community), because the outcomes of professional education are comparatively easy to define and

assess, and finally because of the familiarity of assessment processes as an ingredient of professional certification, there is generally little debate over the legitimacy of outcomes assessment as a part of the accreditation process.

Regional accreditation presents a quite different picture. Here accountability is owed not to an external authority, but rather to the academy itself. In extending accreditation to an institution, the academy as a whole recognizes and certifies that the institution meets certain minimum standards--as embodied, for example, in the willingness of other institutions to accept its academic credits in transfer. Also in this regard, the academy acts to protect "consumer interest"; prospective students must be assured that sufficient resources are available to enable them to complete their programs without substantial disruption. What are the legitimate boundaries of such accountability with respect to assessment? Answering this question means returning to some original grounding assumptions of accreditation, embodied in the principles of self-study.

A first principle of self-study is that it is <u>self</u>-study. That is, the institution undertakes an evaluation of its operations and attainments in terms of its own publicly expressed instructional goals. This principle reflects the legitimacy of diversity. Because colleges and universities are founded for many purposes, serve many different types of students, and incorporate a range of different educational values and technologies, self-study allows investigations of effectiveness to proceed without imposing a common, and presumably narrowing, set of standards.

A second principle of self-study, however, is that it is self-<u>study</u>. That is, it is a process of inquiry which, like other processes of academic inquiry, is subject to the canons of good research. Here accountability resides as much in method as in the result obtained. The peer review process is often described in such terms--a primary charge of visiting teams being to "validate" the self-study undertaken by each institution.

A final principle of self-study is improvement. Investigation is not undertaken for its own sake but rather to enable the institution to build on strengths and address identified weaknesses. As a result, for accreditation a final domain of accountability is the action taken. Institutions found wanting in particular areas, for example, are required to prepare periodic progress reports or to receive focused team visits.

Viewed as elements of institutional accountability, these three principles reflect the values of the academy with respect to any kind of inquiry: appropriate inquiry is generally held to be a) freely determined by individual scholars and value-neutral, b) methodologically rigorous, and c) ongoing and continuously refined over time. What do they particularly require in the area of assessment? At minimum, evidence of three kinds is needed:

- Clear statements of instructional intent, including the kinds of instructional outcomes that the institution and its programs seek to produce

- Documentation of the processes by which the institution ensures that these goals are in fact being attained, together with appropriate evidence of attainment

- Evidence of how the results of these processes are actually used by the institutions to make improvements.

In each area, accountability is focused primarily and appropriately on process. In no case is assessment evidence to be separated from the institution's particular context or its unique instructional mission. Moreover, what results are communicated as part of the process need not be directly comparable to those reported by other institutions.

3. "Consumer Protection". By far the most diffuse area of accountability for educational results are recent calls for individual colleges and universities to provide information to guide "consumer choice". Although generally expressed by state and federal authorities, accountability here is owed to a wide range of particular individual students and parents faced with a choice of which of many available institutions to attend.

What should accountability of this kind legitimately encompass? A first answer starts with the claims to effectiveness that colleges and universities themselves assert. This answer--a demand for "truth in advertising"--asks institutions to carefully examine what they publicly claim to accomplish, and to substantiate such claims with reasonable evidence. The primary point of departure for accountability of this kind is thus the information that the institution provides to prospective consumers. Such information is typically located in many places. Among the most common are college catalogues, "view books", and other recruitment materials. Claims most often made through such media include: a) successful preparation for and placement in favorable employment situations or graduate programs; b) a range of general knowledge and skills deemed important for social functioning and individual fulfillment; and c) a distinctive set of personal values cultivated by the institution's history and traditions. Often these are accompanied by statements about the distinctiveness of the learning environment that the institution provides--for example, references to small classes, opportunities for frequent contact with faculty, or claims about the use of particular kinds of instructional technology.

A second accountability demand is more specific. In addition to the public claims made by colleges, potential consumers may have a legitimate interest in particular areas of instructional performance. Recent legislation on community colleges in California, for example, requires each district to report periodic "consumer" performance to potential students on a variety of dimensions (California General Assembly 1986). Among many such claims, it is possible to identify at least three minimal domains of legitimate "consumer" accountability:

- Potential students of different background and ability have a legitimate claim to know their chances of actually completing a particular program of study. Furthermore, they should be aware of how long the process typically takes. Both are prudent questions for any potential investor.

- Potential students also have a legitimate right to know the institution's actual record in placing students in relevant employment situations or in graduate training. Once again, to guide choice, such information should indicate any relevant differences in success experienced by different types of students.

- Finally, potential students have a claim to information about the past success of the institution in producing "satisfied customers." While to some extent expressed satisfaction will be embodied in the prior two dimensions, a large component of satisfaction is embodied in personal goal attainment.

Most institutions already can provide a great deal of information on each of these dimensions (Lenning and Cooper 1978). And certainly institutions need provide no guarantees of individual success. Potential students, like other kinds of service consumers, must recognize that the investment they are making requires that they keep their part of the bargain by actively engaging in the educational process.

Regardless of source, external demands for accountability will severely constrain an institution's ability to develop local assessment mechanisms that meet their own needs. Establishing legitimate domains of external accountability with respect to instructional outcomes can mitigate these constraints. But it cannot remove them. Institutions will be left with difficult choices about how to proceed with a particular assessment. In what specific areas must such choices be made? Emerging experience suggests three main arenas.

1. What and How to Assess. Probably the most basic set of choices that any institution must make concerns the kinds of outcomes to be investigated and the types of methods to be employed. These choices constitute initial answers to the questions of what and how to assess. Prior to answering both, however, is the question of why the effort is to be undertaken (Ewell 1987). If its primary purpose is "formative"--as suggested by most emerging literature on assessment--both the particular outcomes to be assessed and the methods used in doing so may be multiple and creative. If the primary purpose is "summative"--as suggested by many demands for accountability--answers may be quite different.

   A first issue concerns the coverage of assessment: what exactly is to be examined? Potential outcomes of the college experience are many and include dozens of potentially "assessable" attributes. No institution can hope to assess them all. Which should be chosen for explicit investigation? For local improvement, the most obvious choices are those most closely related to institutional purpose or those that most clearly reflect institutional character or distinctiveness. Left to themselves, therefore, the outcomes dimensions for a public community college and a private liberal arts college may markedly differ. The first will appropriately emphasize basic skills and success in entry-level employment; if attitudes are tapped these will most appropriately be limited to student satisfaction. For the small private liberal arts college the answer will be quite different--particularly if the institution emphasizes a particular values orientation or instructional philosophy. Here priority may appropriately be given to assessing student value development and the mastery of generic higher-order intellectual skills.

   External demands for assessment constitute an a priori threat to an institution's choice of appropriate outcomes dimensions. First priority in assessment will inevitably be given to those areas perceived as important for general accountability, regardless of their correspondence to a given institution's purpose. Certainly some outcomes dimensions are arguably of sufficient general importance that all institutions can legitimately be called upon to assess them. The danger comes when such dimensions are not well specified by external authorities, or when lists of "suggested" dimensions are provided. For example, Colorado's House Bill 1187 notes that as a part of accountability institutions might report information on "knowledge, intellectual capacity, and skills, and many include other dimensions of student growth such as self-confidence, persistence, leadership, empathy, social responsibilities, understanding of cultural and intellectual differences, employability, and transferrability." Similar

lists characterize much emerging accountability legislation. The problem in these cases is that institutions will see such suggestions as requirements, and will consequently downplay or abandon far more appropriate local lines of inquiry.

A second difficulty is similar. Many colleges and universities are currently under mandates to design and implement assessment within a very short period; in some states, Missouri and Virginia for example, institutions have been given less than a year to make basic assessment choices. Growing pressure for reporting results on a short time frame may induce institutions to investigate only those outcomes dimensions that are relatively easy to assess. One manifestation of this difficulty is a growing tendency for institutions to quickly and uncritically adopt an available commercial assessment instrument. This choice is compelling because it obviates the need for a time-consuming local process of instrument development. Uncritically adopting such an instrument without careful examination, however, constitutes a virtual surrender of the initiative about what to assess.

This growing phenomenon also illustrates a third difficulty. Many institutions feel under considerable pressure to choose a commercial standardized instrument because such instruments are perceived to be more externally "credible" than locally designed alternatives. Partly this perception is due to the nature of standardized instruments--particularly their ability to provide deceptively concrete performance information in quantitative (and therefore comparative) terms. Partly it is due to the instrument's source, as locally designed assessment procedures will always be open to potential charges of bias. Given both tendencies, the products of a commercial vendor look particularly attractive in meeting external mandates.

2. Organizing Assessment. A second arena of choice in designing an institutional assessment effort is how best to organize the activity. Dimensions of choice in this regard include whether or not to assign a particular office or individual with prime responsibility for coordinating assessment efforts, where in the administrative structure to locate this responsibility, and the integration of assessment efforts with ongoing institutional planning and decisionmaking. Here again, external accountability demands can considerably constrain institutional choice.

   One problem is the likelihood that demands for external reporting will lead to a more centralized assessment effort than are appropriate for an instructional improvement effort. Institutional experience with assessment strongly suggests that the process is at its best for improvement when it is highly decentralized (Ewell 1984, Banta 1986). Considerable diversity among instructional objectives and learning environments is best accommodated by letting academic units experiment with assessment on their own terms. Not only are the resulting activities more congruent with the program's instructional objectives, but the "feedback loop" between information and action is short. Information generated at the departmental level can be quickly and efficiently utilized by practicing faculty in actual classroom settings.

External accountability promotes an opposite organizational imperative. If assessment information is intended primarily for an external audience, centrally organized data collection both gains efficiency and ensures consistency in the information reported. At the same time, centralization provides additional aids to bureaucratic reporting. External authorities can be assured that explicit assignment of outcomes-reporting responsibilities to a particular office means that they will consistently know where to turn for such information, and with whom to negotiate.

Certainly, an assignment of clear responsibility for assessment can considerably enhance local implementation--regardless of whether the primary purpose is improvement or accountability. Indeed, coordinating large-scale data collection procedures virtually requires a centralized function. Central offices can also serve as reservoirs of scarce technical expertise with respect to testing and measurement, and in the interpretation of assessment results. Moreover, some important assessment domains--particularly those associated with general education--cannot be addressed piecemeal. Explicit and visible assignment of responsibility for assessment to a particular office or individual has also helped campuses to symbolize their ongoing commitment to instructional evaluation and improvement. The success of such offices as the Learning Research Center at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and of the Instructional Evaluation Office at Alverno College provide considerable evidence of these benefits. Problems arise only when the primary reasons for centralization are associated with requirements for external reporting.

A second organizational issue concerns the linkage between those responsible for assessment and actual academic practice. In this case more subtle organizational problems are apparent. Compliance demands may induce institutions to create assessment efforts that are recognizably distinct from other domains of institutional activity. For example, several states now require institutions to submit "Institutional Assessment Plans" that describe local procedures for gathering information and using the results (Boyer et al. 1987). Such mechanisms are admirable in their recognition that institutions may appropriately differ in their approach. But they carry a strong implicit message that assessment should be organized as a distinct activity. Experience with effective assessment practice, on the other hand, suggests that institutions should integrate assessment with other ongoing academic planning and evaluation activities. Often the appropriate vehicle for such integration is an existing institutional process of budget planning or program review. But "burying" assessment activities in such existing mechanisms may convey to external authorities lack of seriousness about implementing assessment. Faced with a choice, institutions may increasingly opt for a distinctive and visible effort, regardless of its internal organizational consequences.

One manifestation of this choice has been an increasing tendency to assign responsibility for assessment to an Office of Institutional Research. While this assignment reflects recognition that IR offices are often well equipped to analyze, interpret and disseminate information, it also subtly differentiates the assessment function from the domain of academic affairs. Linkages between Offices of Institutional Research and departmental faculty are generally weak, and most faculty see Institutional Research as an administrative activity. More importantly, the center of gravity of

institutional research has in recent years increasingly shifted toward external accountability. As a result, assigning responsibility for assessment to an IR office sends an unmistakable internal signal that the primary purpose of the exercise is to satisfy the demands of external constituencies.

3. Communicating Assessment Results. A third arena of choice concerns the manner and extent to which the results of assessment are to be communicated, and it is here that the most basic contradictions between accountability and improvement arise. Both functions require effective communication, but the kinds of communication most appropriate to each setting are markedly different. Certainly communication is a critical ingredient of accountability. Regardless of its domain, the concept of accountability requires not only performance itself, but also requires public presentation of evidence that requisite performance has been achieved. Accountability information must also be of a particular kind--generic, summative, and easily comprehended by lay audiences. The use of information for improvement requires a quite different kind of communication. As documented by considerable research on the organizational utilization of evaluation information, the most useful processes of communication are problem-driven, tailored to the particular needs of the user, and iterative (Braskamp and Brown 1980). Indeed, the best utilization processes appear to be those in which data gatherers and program administrators are able to engage in continuous dialogue on the interpretation of evidence. Emerging experience about the institutional use of assessment results seems to confirm this more general finding (Kinnick 1985).

   This basic contradiction is embodied in several concrete issues. First, the public nature of accountability, and the fact that most accountability information is statistical, means that considerable attention will be given to the value of a given statistic rather than to the phenomenon that lies behind it. This is a familiar difficulty in public policy. In higher education we have seen numerous examples of an institution's ability to influence such "performance indicators" as program cost without making fundamental changes in what it is really doing. The tendency to focus on the indicator itself is particularly strong when comparative data are presented. Probably the most pervasive (and legitimate) fear of public institutions with respect to mandated assessment is that the process will lead to uninformed judgments on relative "quality" that do not take into account important differences in institutional missions, resources, and primary clienteles. Under such circumstances, the pressure on institutions to withhold or distort performance information can become considerable.

   A second difficulty is related, and concerns the particular problems associated with communicating negative information. On the one hand, experience indicates that sensitive use of negative information constitutes a powerful lever for internal change. Indeed a classic case of successful information use is Northeast Missouri State University's use of data documenting regression in student mathematical ability to address and rectify serious curricular deficiencies (McClain 1984). Some institutions, moreover, have been unable to mobilize significant internal interest in reforming general education because results of the ACT-COMP examination revealed student performance to be above national norms. Both situations

reveal the power of a negative finding to creatively focus institutional attention and to mobilize action.

These incentives are reversed when negative evidence must be communicated to external constituencies. Partly this is because of the public nature of the exercise. As several institutions have recently discovered to their detriment, negative assessment findings make good copy for local media. But there is also a strong fear on the part of institutions that negative evidence of performance will be used to "punish" institutions by withholding resources or by eliminating programs. Such fears have long been a part of statewide program approval and review processes and have subjected the information used in such processes to considerable pressure. Overcoming such fears has required considerable time, and demands repeated demonstration by state authorities that they are not simply looking for new ways to reduce budgets.

A final communications difficulty concerns the general lack of articulation between requirements for communicating assessment results and existing accountability requirements that mandate complex data collection and reporting. Many states require assessment to be <u>added</u> to existing accountability requirements in such areas as mission review, program review and approval, and enrollment/financial reporting. In California, for example, the outcomes-reporting provisions established in recently passed accountability legislation for the state's community colleges are added to an already complex set of reporting requirements. In Colorado, accountability reporting and its associated resource consequences are but one of five parts of a general bill that establishes mandated admissions requirements for all public institutions, procedures for program discontinuance, and methods for disbursing "centers of excellence" funds. In such cases there is generally little effort to articulate assessment reporting with many other related requirements for communicating information on institutional condition and performance. By increasing the complexity of reporting, this situation adds to an administrative burden that is already large. Moreover, by divorcing the communication of assessment results from other processes related to the extent and condition of academic programs, it reinforces tendencies to divorce assessment from institutional decisionmaking.

Some Principles of Institutional Response

With major contradictions between accountability and improvement identified, it is possible to describe some promising avenues for institutional response. Here it is important to remember that the rhetoric of external calls for assessment visibly stresses the priority of local improvement. This means that contradictions are often more apparent than real, as they arise as they are based upon what institutions <u>think</u> are the motives and needs of external bodies than a full understanding of what these constituencies actually intend. In some areas institutional and state concerns really are coincident. Such cases, if they can be identified, should constitute particular priorities for institutional action. Certainly effective institutional response will require administrators to take the initiative across a range of such "win/win" situations. But how can these situations best be identified? Before presenting some examples of promising practice, it is useful to note some broad principles of response.

1. <u>Respond Visibly to Domains of Legitimate External Concern</u>. Not all demands for information on instructional performance are illegitimate. In many cases, they arise out of real needs to discharge important responsibilities. For state authorities, discharging such responsibilities may benefit all of higher education. As the cases of New Jersey, Tennessee and Florida attest, evidence of need or effectiveness provided by both the existence and the results of state assessment programs can ground powerful arguments for increased public support for higher education. Responding visibly and in good faith to emerging accrediting initiatives with respect to educational outcomes can similarly help restore the present low estate of voluntary accreditation as a credible process of improvement and quality assurance. Visibly responding to identified areas of statewide concern benefits can benefit individual institutions as well. One clear benefit is communication. By responding in good faith to external requests for information in such areas as the mastery of basic skills and in the placement of graduates in key manpower areas, institutions can communicate their recognition that the needs of external authorities are in many cases legitimate. In doing so, they have a much better chance of being heard when they argue that in other arenas the collection and use of assessment information is best left in institutional hands. At the same time, many of these legitimate demands for information are relatively easy to satisfy. Information on retention, program completion, and basic skills mastery do not present major measurement difficulties and are probably already on hand at most institutions. Promptly complying with requests for information in such areas will pay considerably more long-term dividends to institutions than will responses based primarily on an attitude that any external demand for performance information ought to be resisted.

2. <u>Build On Strength</u>. Most institutions already collect considerable information on student performance. In many cases, the primary challenge in creating an assessment program is to identify, inventory, and integrate the results of many ongoing but uncoordinated data collection efforts. In responding to external demands for information, this process is equally important, not only because it results in efficiency but also because it saves time. Existing data bases and data collection points should be carefully examined to determine the degree to which they can, with little

modification, provide the kinds of information required for external reporting. As above, it may be far more important to show good faith by quickly communicating information of interest to external authorities, than to embark on a complex and costly effort to develop new data collection mechanisms.

3. Show Action. Much of the recent concern about higher education's performance is due more to a loss of confidence than to a desire on the part of external authorities to actively run the enterprise. As evidenced by emerging state programs, external authorities are far more interested in fostering local self-improvement than they are in imposing an inappropriate conformity. If this trend continues, it may be important for institutions to communicate the actions that they have taken to address identified strengths and weaknesses than simply to communicate the results of assessment. Again an emerging body of institutional experience reinforces this conclusion. At public institutions that have experimented with using information about student performance in the budgeting or program review process (such as SUNY-Albany and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville), assessment information is always a beginning point for a proposed departmental course of action--presented together with its expected time-line and its associated resource consequences. Responses such as these demonstrate not only accountability but also responsibility. The more institutions can provide them, the more likely it will be that external authorities will allow increased latitude in tailoring assessment methods and approaches to institutional needs. If, on the other hand, the institution's response is to treat accountability merely as communicating a required set of statistics, the reaction of external authorities is likely to be to increase the number of things to be reported.

Given these principles, what particular kinds of action can institutions undertake? A number of promising lines of activity that combine two or more of these principles can be immediately identified.

- Extend or initiate post-testing of basic skills. Most institutions currently engage in considerable pre-testing of student abilities in such areas as reading, writing, and computation. Their primary purpose is to place students appropriately--either in a particular college-level sequence of courses, or in a remediation program designed to address identified weaknesses. Externally designed standardized instruments are generally used in such processes although, in computation particularly, many institutions construct their own. Only in rare cases, however, are students typically re-tested using the same (or any) instruments to ascertain the competency achieved, or to assess the effectiveness of remediation. Initiating a local program of this kind can have considerable external payoff. It first responds proactively to an area of particular (and legitimate) external concern. Secondly, it ensures and demonstrates the effectiveness of the remediation function as a point of access. Finally, it demonstrates the institution's willingness to use standardized assessment instruments where these are believed to be warranted. At least as importantly, proposing and implementing a program of this kind will meet far less internal resistance than will other alternatives. Many faculty will see such an initiative as a guarantee that students possess important

college-level skills before entering their own classrooms. More importantly, few faculty interests will be directly threatened by evaluating remediation. Finally, the technology of assessment need not be an issue. The value of assessment in providing useful information will already have been demonstrated, and most decisions about which instruments to use and how to interpret the results will already have been made.

- Experiment with new approaches to student evaluation within the regular curriculum. Because eroded confidence in college and university grading practices is a major stimulus for external assessment, an institution's own grading system is an obvious point of attack for developing a credible approach to assessment. What can be done to restore lost confidence? Two kinds of activities, once common, are rapidly becoming important features of undergraduate curricula. The first are senior comprehensive examinations requiring a student to integrate knowledge and skills taught throughout the curriculum. In most cases, such examinations cover the student's major field, but in some they also require demonstration of a range of general knowledge and skills. In some cases as well, senior comprehensives are team-graded, and the multiple judgments of performance that the process involves provide additional evidence of its credibility. The external impact of such examinations is further increased when they are developed cooperatively among several departments or institutions. In Tennessee, for example, a number of institutions have cooperated in developing major field examinations as required by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. A second emerging practice--using external examiners--further extends this logic. Drawn from faculty of equivalent departments in matched peer institutions, external examiners can give useful feedback on the curriculum as a whole, as well as assessing individual student performance. At the same time, they provide a "disinterested" check on local faculty grading practice. A current AAC project using external examiners is currently underway and the approach shows great promise in simultaneously enhancing curricular improvement and in demonstrating credible assessment practice.

- Seek the testimony of "satisfied customers". Graduates and former students are the ultimate products of an institution's instruction. As such, their testimony can be particularly valuable in the political process of accountability. Because they are the direct recipients and beneficiaries of instruction, their opinions of its effectiveness are by definition relevant. Because they are interested parties, external agencies cannot politically afford to ignore them. And because they are no longer associated with the institution and can be presumed to be actively testing the knowledge and skills that they acquired in the marketplace and in further education, their responses are generally credible. Furthermore, collecting information from former students is not technically daunting. Most of the required information can be obtained by survey, and many techniques are available for ensuring reasonable response rates. Most colleges and universities currently undertake periodic alumni or former student surveys, but they rarely use them to their fullest potential. Most such surveys are limited to

postgraduate job and graduate school placement. Adding to such efforts by including items on personal and educational goal achievement, on self-reported gains in identified knowledge and skill areas, and on a range of current behaviors and values can provide a rich source of information useful for both external accountability and to inform local improvement. Finally, information of this kind is not directly threatening to faculty; far more faculty cooperation and interest can be expected in this arena than in cognitive testing where the stakes to faculty appear much higher.

- Beware the "Unaccompanied Number". Certainly the greatest single institutional fear with respect to externally mandated assessment is that overall instructional effectiveness will be judged on the basis of a few standardized statistics. Most emerging state programs do not seem to be emphasizing this approach, but prudent institutions must still anticipate misuse of publicly communicated assessment results. How is this best accomplished? A general answer is to ensure that supplementary information always be provided, to place all required outcomes information in its proper context. Specifically, two kinds of contextual information need to be provided. The first is information that allows an audience to judge the reliability and importance of a given result. If follow-up surveys, for example, indicate that students are experiencing difficulty in obtaining the entry-level jobs for which they have been trained, additional information on the depressed state of key sectors of the local economy may help to explain the finding. If results of student performance on standardized examinations is required, these results might be accompanied by additional information that confirms or disconfirms the reported result--for example, student performance on other examinations, or by information that helps to explain the result--for example, performance on entering aptitude or placement examinations, evidence of deficient high school course-taking, and so on. A second kind of context is provided by additional information on intended action to address identified deficiencies. Communicating institutional plans together with required assessment results demonstrates that the institution takes the assessment process seriously and intends to do something about it. Certainly in neither case is there a guarantee that providing additional information will prevent the abuse of performance statistics. But it may forestall more obtrusive action. At the very least, if public criticism arises, the institution will already be on record with a response.

- Offer information on student outcomes to external constituencies even if unasked. This strategy emphasizes the importance of taking every opportunity to share important results of local assessment. As noted throughout, it is critical that institutions demonstrate that they are not in principle opposed to assessment, and that they in fact engage in a lot of it. Existing external reporting requirements provide many opportunities for an institution to actively demonstrate that it has made a commitment to using assessment results. Among them are such state-mandated processes as program approval and program review, mission review and strategic planning processes, and accreditation self-study reports. Though outcomes information may not be required in such processes or may play only a minor role,

including it on the institution's own initiative highlights its assessment capabilities, and demonstrates its knowledge of how such information can be used to improve practice. Indeed, external constituents will likely judge the adequacy of a local assessment effort partly by its consistency: how often and in how many different areas does the institution demonstrate that it is taking this information seriously? Given this unspoken criterion, institutions should take every available opportunity to tell their own stories with respect to outcomes.

- Make "assessment" a visible part of the curriculum. Senior comprehensive examinations and the use of external examiners represent special cases of a more general institutional response--emphasizing the presence of assessment throughout the curriculum. Student performance in most curricula is evaluated constantly, but the processes used are both ill-documented and are unevenly practiced. How can these deficiencies be addressed? One promising approach is simply to document the curriculum more fully. To communicate effectively, curriculum design should emphasize its intended outcomes as explicitly as possible. Moreover, it should note the kinds of generic skills that students are intended to gain, as well as the disciplinary knowledge that the curriculum encompasses. Once provided, curriculum goals of this kind provide an important starting place for local assessment. But their presence and visibility in public documents sends an additional important message to external constituents. At the same time, the institution should highlight developing faculty efforts to assess student performance. Descriptions of senior comprehensive examinations, projects, or "capstone experiences" should contain some indications of how student performance will be assessed--particularly if the process involves team evaluation or the use of practicing professionals. The same principles ultimately apply to the documentation of each course, its requirements, and its examinations.

- Make assessment results a visible part of important administrative processes. A parallel response involves documenting the role of assessment results in important, regular administrative processes. Examples include course approval, program review, strategic planning, and institutional budgeting. In contrast to documenting existing assessment practice in the curriculum, here the use of information on instructional outcomes will in most cases be novel. As yet, the majority of institutions have not accorded a prominent place for outcomes information in ongoing administrative decisionmaking. Here again, assessment results are best used in conjunction with more familiar management information, as an integral part of established decision mechanisms. Such processes themselves, however, are often badly documented. Building external credibility for institutional assessment practice may require making visible such linkages and showing that they make a difference. Documents such as local planning manuals, program review guidelines, budget review and preparation guidelines, and institutional "Fact Books" should all accord a visible place for information on student outcomes, and a review of the actual decisions made should reflect full consideration of such information.

- Communicate assessment practices, not just results. Asked or unasked, it is as important for institutions to communicate their processes of assessment as it is to present the outcomes themselves. External authorities need to be able to present evidence of action to their own constituencies--legislators and the wider public. To the degree that they have reassuring stories to tell, individual institutions and higher education in general will likely be allowed greater discretion. If little information is reported, external authorities may assume the worst: that the institution is not intending to comply. Because comprehensive institutional assessment programs will require some time to get established (three years is a common experience for those currently engaging in such efforts), for a while there will be few actual results to communicate. This inevitable lag calls particular attention to the need to provide information about the assessment process. Several states now require institutions to submit locally developed assessment plans documenting what they intend to do. Even where such plans are not explicitly required, their development and dissemination to appropriate external constituencies appears a good idea. Where such plans are required, institutions should on their own initiative provide periodic additional information on how they are being implemented and modified. Once again, existing reporting opportunities such as statewide program reviews, strategic planning exercises, or institutional self-studies should be fully utilized to communicate assessment plans and practices.

- Don't show everything at once. Tempering the above observation, external authorities also value novelty. They particularly want to be able to cite new institutional practices, consistent with the guidelines that they provide. Furthermore, novelty provides evidence of ongoing commitment. If institutions appear to undertake new initiatives each year, they also show that they remain seriously committed to assessment. Too much novelty, of course, can send a negative message; certainly any "new" initiatives reported must be consistent both with one another and with the institution's past practices with regard to assessment. But it is probably wise for institutions to keep a few of their assessment practices and results in reserve, both to have something new each year to promise, and to have something new to report.

Through all these suggested strategies runs a common theme: in assessment as in other areas, accountability is a bargain between two parties. As such, it is subject to specified terms and conditions, and depends upon the mutual good faith with which these are observed by the respective parties. In keeping their part of the bargain, institutions must recognize the legitimacy of many external requests for outcomes information. It is both inappropriate and ultimately ineffective for them to refuse cooperation in providing the information that external constituencies need to discharge their assigned responsibilities. At the same time, it is incumbent upon institutions to continually remind external authorities of their part of the bargain. Requests for information about student instructional performance must be carefully limited to areas of legitimate external concern. Outside these areas, institutions ought to be allowed, and should insist upon, maximum discretion. In exercising discretion, however, institutions should also keep external

constituencies fully informed about the processes they have established and the actions they have taken. Above all, it is important for each institution to demonstrate good faith in its efforts to comply with the spirit of external assessment demands. Cooperative efforts will in the long run prove less painful than the appearance of non-compliance. More importantly, demonstrating cooperation can further local interest. Compliance, in itself, is a barren exercise. Taking the initiative to move beyond compliance is an institutional response that will allow the legitimate interests of both parties to prosper.

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